

# THEY WHO DIG PITS

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THE Warriners' old-fashioned victoria turned into the avenue which led to Stone Gardens. Its single occupant wore her prettiest gown and an air of bright unconcern—which meant that Patty Warriner was on the defensive.

"I can't understand Mrs. Westmoreland's olive-branch," she mused. "The old cat must have something up her sleeve!"

Neither a sleeve nor an olive-branch being a natural appurtenance of cats, it is plain that metaphors were not Miss Warriner's strong point.

Mrs. Westmoreland's son was an anemic youth, called "Hughie" by his family, while Patty designated him by that expression of disdain commonly spelled "Ugh!" When, following in the wake of the majority of the young men in the scattered Broad Rock neighborhood, he had fallen in love with Patricia Warriner, his family had openly expressed their disapproval. In spite of irreproachable family connections, Patty was poor, with that exasperating poverty which seems unconscious of its own existence. For some reason which the Westmorelands could never fathom, the Warriners' home had always been the popular gathering-place of the community; but it was positively in need of repairs.

There were yet graver accusations which could be brought against Patty.

"Patricia is frivolous, my son, she is superficial," Mrs. Westmoreland had declared. "I have even detected a vulgar tendency toward flirtation."

Hugh had anxiously repeated this charge to Patty, whereupon the indignant ladies of Stone Gardens were treated to the sight of Hugh in pursuit of that young woman for the next six months. It would perhaps describe

the situation more exactly to say that he followed after her in the manner of a maltreated poodle. Then Patty did the only thing which could have incensed them more than accepting Hugh—she rejected him.

"Not even to tease that abominable mother and those two old-maid sisters can I stand the sight of Hugh's moon-face another day, daddy!" she exploded.

Mr. Warriner laughed, as he nearly always did, at Patty's naughtiness; so it was no wonder that she was spoiled.

Since that event, Mrs. Westmoreland had confined her attentions to Patty to chilling bows when they chanced to meet at the homes of mutual friends, so the girl was puzzled at the invitation which had come to an informal afternoon tea.

Patty greeted Mrs. Westmoreland and her daughters—girls of the age known as "indeterminate"—and gave a friendly little hand to Hugh, who looked sulky. Mrs. Westmoreland's voice had an unfamiliar sweetness, like honey over a lump of ice, as she explained that she had invited a very few of their friends to meet M. Edouard Pernet.

Everybody at Broad Rock knew the story of the eccentric Mr. Courtenay, whose only daughter, years ago, had run away with a French portrait-painter, and who had been disinherited for it. He had never seen her again, but after her death a late repentance had caused him to will all his estate to the grandson. This young fellow had come from Paris with the avowed intention of settling in America, and it was rumored that his visit to Broad Rock was for the purpose of arranging to sell the beautiful old place which his grandfather had used as a summer home.

"M. Pernet's father was so outraged at old Mr. Courtenay's action that he

never permitted his son to learn English; so, of course, as a compliment to him, we shall speak only French this afternoon. Isn't that the sound of hoofs? Yes, that is he—how well he rides! Tall and blue-eyed like his mother's people—quite American in appearance, is he not?"

The blow had fallen. So this was the "old cat's" card—to humiliate her before the sulky son and the good-looking guest. Sophia and Marianne Westmoreland had graduated with honors at college. Once Hugh, timidly venturing to cut Patty over to a pattern of his mother's approval, had suggested that his sisters read a fixed number of pages in some modern language every day.

Patty had cheerfully informed him that if he could persuade the men around them not to take up every moment of her time with riding, tennis, golf, and dancing, she might be able to accomplish more solid reading than one magazine story per month. But that was a bluff on Patty's part, for the deficiencies of her education were a real regret to her. Her mother's delicate health had kept her at home, and her father's easy good-nature had granted the position of governess to an elderly cousin, whose need of a home was accepted in lieu of other qualifications for the place. Patty had received no other training save for the preceding year, which she had spent at school in Baltimore.

As she was introduced to the guest of honor, and saw in his eyes the quick flash of interest, with which she was pleasantly familiar, she felt as conscious of her ignorance as even her hostess could wish. During the flow of Mrs. Westmoreland's French, as pompous as the upholstering of her furniture, the voluble stream of Sophia's and Marianne's twittering echo, or the occasional remarks from their Charleston friends, Patty sat silent and uncomprehending.

Finally Pernet turned to her with some question. With the clear rose staining her cheeks, she managed to reply in French, as she had often found it necessary to say to Mme. de la Loge at school:

"Will you have the kindness to speak a little slower? I did not understand."

The look of surprised gratification on

Pernet's face was mystifying, for she did not know how the Westmoreland's American pronunciation had grated on the Parisian ear. Patty had a gift of imitation, and her French teacher had been enthusiastic over the flexibility of her vowels and the purity of her accent.

"Ah, you have been in Paris?" asked Pernet quickly.

"Not yet." It is hard to explain how provocative, how challenging, Patty made that softly murmured "*Pas encore!*"

The Westmorelands were inwardly indignant at penniless Patty pretending that Paris was a possibility.

When a girl is very young, wholly pretty, and determinedly silent, it is difficult to prove that her demureness is a cloak for her ignorance. So, after the guest of honor had chatted for some time with the Westmoreland sisters and the Charlestonians, who were descended from the Huguenots and spoke French fluently, and Patty's one remark had been to ask for more sugar in her tea—it had two lumps already, but that chanced to be a sentence she remembered—Mrs. Westmoreland felt that the result of her scheme was disappointing. She had neither proved conclusively to Hugh how fortunate he was not to have married an *ignoramus*, nor to M. Pernet how superior were the attainments of her daughters.

## II

TEA had been served on the piazza, which commanded an extensive view, and with suave speech Mrs. Westmoreland suggested that Patricia should show M. Pernet about the gardens from which the place was named. With its stone benches, statues, rock wall, and shrubbery clipped into prim shapes, Patty had always thought the formal garden a hideous spot.

Poor Patty had to stammer her lack of comprehension again, so Mrs. Westmoreland repeated her request in English, her eyes shining rather maliciously as she added:

"Stay just as long as you like, my dear. The young men always find you so entertaining!"

M. Pernet had risen from his seat with visible alacrity.

As they passed down the broad walk, the young Frenchman was talking with evident interest. The group of onlookers saw Patricia tilt her charming face to his like a saucy bird and pour out a torrent of words. They could not hear what she said, but her companion stood still for a moment, as if in utter bewilderment, and then broke into a ringing laugh.

"She has evidently shocked him," said Mrs. Westmoreland, aside to her son.

"She can talk French, however. Can't you see how she is chatting away to him? All that dumbness on the piazza must have been a pretense."

He could not have guessed that in reply to Pernet's conventional remark about his gratitude to the gardens, Patty had murmured:

"The father, the mother, the uncle, the aunt, the son, the daughter, the father-in-law, the mother-in-law, the godfather, the godmother, the gardener, the gardener's wife, the maid, the coachman, the cook, the butler."

At his amazement she stumbled into desperate speech, the tenses of her verbs all wrong, but her pleading eyes, brimming with tears, quite eloquent enough to atone for mistaken genders and numbers.

"I don't understand French. I can't speak it. I only know the grammar exercises we studied at school. Please help me."

The way she had translated the last was by using a phrase she recalled as the cry of an inmate of a burning building:

"*A moi! Au secours! Au secours!*"

It was so exaggerated under the present circumstances that the French-American laughed heartily. His manner was that of courteous interrogation, for the situation puzzled him. Patty, who could imitate anybody, stiffened before Pernet's amused eyes, and in just the pompous, nasal accent of her hostess, began:

"Cold, cloud, rain, shower, snow, storm, hurricane, ice, fog, frost, hoarfrost, thunder, and lightning."

By her pantomime he understood that she was personating Mrs. Westmoreland in displeasure. Suddenly she took

the moon-look of Hugh, and began to conjugate the verb to love, in the first person, affirmative voice. Her manner was lackadaisical as she timidly drawled out the tenses of *aimer*:

"I love, I was loving, I loved, I will love."

Then, resuming her own saucy personality, her eyes sparkling with mischief, she began to conjugate the verb over, this time negatively and emphatically:

"I do not love, I did not love, I could not love."

The man grasped the situation fully, and understood what was the cause of the coolness between his hostess and his companion. He was shaking with laughter—"good American laughter," thought Patty approvingly—over the situation confided to him and the manner of the revelation.

He began to talk very slowly, choosing simple words and substituting another when she would shake her head, until she managed to follow him fairly well. But when her turn came to reply, she stumbled, floundered, and gave it up. All at once she recalled the exercises in her conversation-book, which she had learned almost by heart.

"Who is it that knocks? Is it you, my dear uncle? I am charmed to see you. Won't you have that easy chair?" She motioned to the stone bench, and they seated themselves upon it. "How is your wife?" He made a violent disclaimer, but Patty persisted mercilessly: "Her eyes are weak, and she has a very bad cold and coughs continually. You should stop at the apothecary's and buy her some lozenges and a plaster."

"I *won't!*" he declared positively. "Let me stop at the florist's and get you some violets instead."

Though "violettes" was the only word she grasped in the sentence, that was sufficient for her to perceive his meaning, and she gave a barely perceptible nod of permission.

"Your accent is so charming," he continued, "that I prefer to listen to you repeating exercises from a grammar than to hear the speech that has tortured my ears ever since I came to America."

"The only word I understand," said Patty, "is *charming*."

But that supplied sufficient encouragement for her to repeat exercises and vocabularies in medley variety as she happened to remember them. The indisposition of his supposed wife had recalled one of her favorite vocabularies. It would have been impossible for anybody but Patty to make a mere vocabulary so ridiculous, with pathetically drooped mouth and eyes from which the lurking laughter was extinguished as she repeated:

"A pain, a sharp pain, throbbings, a headache, an illness, a fever, a fit of ague, the scarlet fever, the smallpox, the whooping-cough, chilblains, a gargle, a pill, a poultice, a blister, relief, sleep, a cure, a relapse, the death-pangs, the death-rattle."

By the time she had reached "*L'agonie, le rôle*," Pernet was so heartily amused that Mrs. Westmoreland spied it from afar, and saw her ruse failing before her eyes. She suggested to Sophia to go and ask them if they would not have another cup of tea. Patty perceived Sophia bearing down upon them, and, looking up into her companion's face with the winsomest, sweetest glance, she murmured softly:

"Will you lend me your bodkin? Will you bring me some fresh towels? Will you have the kindness to hand me my large plumed hat? Will you fasten my bodice? Will you bring me my blue silk petticoat?"

Sophia was too near for her to continue any further, and Pernet's reply was rather incoherent, but so rapid and idiomatic that Sophia herself could not follow.

They gratefully declined the tea, and as Sophia returned toward the house she heard him say, in the most encouraging, the most intimate manner:

"Do go on. We were talking about your blue silk petticoat."

"Mother," said Sophia, drawing that lady aside for a moment, "Patricia is positively indecent! She is talking to that utter stranger about her underwear, and pretending that it is silk! As for French," Miss Westmoreland went on indignantly, "she understands it perfectly. He was talking to her as fast as his tongue could fly, and she was looking up at him in that interested way she has

and taking in every word. Your plan is an utter failure."

In the meantime, Pernet was urging Patty to continue. She shook her head, she grew confused. If there was one way in which Patty could look prettier than her normal state, it was when she was embarrassed.

Pernet insisted, chiding her with forgetting her lessons like a stupid child. She took up the challenge and defiantly finished the exercise:

"Will you lend me your opera-glasses? Will you bring me a fan? Will you give me a gold ring?"

Presently the recreant pair strolled to the house together. In well-chosen words, which M. Pernet had just suggested and taught her to repeat, she thanked Mrs. Westmoreland for the charming afternoon and the privilege of rubbing up her rusty French.

When one of the Charleston ladies said that she regretted to hear that M. Pernet was to sell the Broad Rock place, he declared that he had changed his mind and had decided to keep it for a summer home. In fact, as Miss Warriner had been kind enough to promise to give him lessons in English, he had determined to open the place and remain at Broad Rock for the present, not choosing to miss such an exceptional educational opportunity.

Pernet waited a moment for the sulky boy, whose duty it was, to accompany Miss Warriner to the dilapidated victoria. But as Hugh, scowling and ugly, remained where he was, Pernet handed Patty to her carriage, with the easy grace natural to him. It had been a trying ordeal to the girl, and he felt her slender hand tremble as she placed it in his. A faint, grateful pressure responded to his as he said *au revoir*.

"To-morrow, at ten—our first lesson," he reminded her.

Perhaps they both felt that they were to learn from each other that universal language whose rules of syntax have never been written.

As Pernet returned to make courteous adieus to his hostess, Patty's soft voice was echoing in his remembrance:

"Will you give me a gold ring?"

Impatiently he wondered how long it would be before he might!